



Free Magazine

February 2026

Courtesy of TJ Tijerina



Explore Harlingen
Magazine Online



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From the Editor

By Lisa Campos

This is Lisa from Explore Harlingen. Welcome to the 28th issue of the Explore Harlingen Magazine: A Local's Guide to Harlingen, an entertainment magazine about Harlingen, Texas!

For 12 years, I have been informing locals and visitors about current events, activities, and family-owned businesses in Harlingen primarily on Facebook (www.facebook.com/ExploreHarlingen). I also have an online presence with my website, www.exploreharlingenblog.com, and social media accounts on Instagram and TikTok (@exploreharlingen).

In this issue, we discuss the Los Fresnos rodeo, a college student cookie entrepreneur, nonprofit



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

Love Thy Neighbor, a husband-and-wife band, and more.

The Explore Harlingen Magazine is available digitally on my website at www.exploreharlingenblog.com/magazine (see QR code on the cover). Or you can pick up a copy at

the first of every month locally around town. Additionally, you can contact Victor Moreno to purchase a subscription, which allows you to receive the monthly magazine in the mail. ♦

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On the
Cover

Going Strong: Los Fresnos Rodeo Returns for Its 36th Year



Courtesy of TJ Tijerina

By Abigail Muñiz-Garcia

Polish your boots and get your hats ready because the Los Fresnos Rodeo is set to begin Friday, February 20. Not only has it become a staple event in the PRCA Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) circuit, but it has put Los Fresnos on the map. It boosts business and the city's economy with people flocking from all over the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) and beyond to experience what the rodeo has to offer.

Rodeo committee chairman Larry Cantu, and a dedicated group of volunteers along with the other committee members, put in the work to bring this event together every year, finding ways to continue to



Courtesy of TJ Tijerina

improve it while honoring its traditions. They have also found a way to give

back. The rodeo awards scholarships to students every year.

"It's something we do for the community and to help raise funds to give

Courtesy of Los Fresnos Rodeo

scholarships, not only for kids in Los Fresnos, but graduating seniors located in Cameron County," Cantu, a Los Fresnos native, said.

New this year to kick off the rodeo is a Thursday night concert. Fans can catch Braxton Keith on stage February 19 at 8:30 pm with general admission opening at 7 pm.

"We hope to have a good crowd because it's the first time we are going to do that," Cantu said. "It should be a really good time."

There will be different shows throughout the rodeo including in the midway area—there isn't a charge to enter that space. Visitors can enjoy attractions like a magic and juggling show by Pat Davidson & Tess, a variety act by Pistol Packin' Paula, a magic and clown

act by Tintin Campa, and more. Local bands will also perform on stage in the midway area.

Like other years, the Cameron County Fair and Livestock Show will also be going on, which gives students the opportunity to show their livestock. The Heart of America Carnival will also be set up and ready to go by Thursday at 6 pm, offering carnival rides and games with the purchase of wristbands.

Cantu is proud of the caliber of cowboys that make the journey to South Texas from Canada, Brazil, Mexico, and all over the United States.

"We are very fortunate. We get a lot of the good cowboys show up," he said. "We get some of the top cowboys because we have some of the top stock."

The rodeo will start at 7 pm on Friday and Saturday

and at 3 pm on Sunday. On Friday and Saturday after the rodeo ends with a fireworks show, there will be concerts. Annie Bosko will perform on Friday and Randall King will end the night on Saturday.

"It's all family-oriented entertainment," Cantu said. "People from all ages can come and enjoy. And we encourage people to get there early for the rodeo."

For more information about the schedule of events, to become a rodeo sponsor, or to purchase tickets to the rodeo and concerts, please visit www.lfrodeo.com. ♦



Courtesy of TJ Tijerina



Courtesy of TJ Tijerina

Two Cool Girls and the Antler



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

By Laisa Chavez Macias

As we all ease our way into the second month of this new year and settle into the rhythm of life after the holidays, I can't help but wonder if anyone else is already missing all the delicious foods we used to enjoy! January usually starts out with resets, resolutions, and restrictions, especially when it comes to mealtimes. By the time February rolls around, we have either fully committed

or completely fallen off the wagon, am I right?

What if I told you there's a perfect middle ground option available to us locally? You know, for those days we want to indulge but not overdo it. Or for my foodies who just love a great meal packed with flavor, but don't have the time to cook, yet are still wanting that healthier option.

Well, WE DO!

Boca ChewLita prepared meals are one of Harlingen's best kept secrets. It was

started by Lita N. Garcia and her business partner and wife Sara in 2019 to focus on eating fresh cooked meals. Their meals mean less eating out, less giant portion sizes, and less processed foods. Instead, Lita created a menu that offers "good food" with "quality over quantity."

Before I go any further, let me explain something that can be a little confusing. Boca ChewLita offers prepared meals, not meal prep. The food is all made fresh. The focus is on flavor and portion control. There is no counting of calories, macros, or carbs. Which is why I call this a happy medium. In our meeting Lita explained it perfectly when she said, "It's a personal chef experience."

Lita, a Harlingen native, graduated from TSTC culinary school and worked under chef Patrick Bower. As an artist she always struggled letting go of her work; however, food for

her is an art form that she loves to share. As she put it, "Artist by nature, chef by nurture." The many days spent in the kitchen with her grandmother fueled her interest in cooking, ultimately leading her to study the culinary arts.

Most creatives need a little or big push to get the ball rolling in the right direction though. By 2022, the girls had established a small but loyal following. Lita was still working full time, but Sara knew the side gig could be more. With her guidance, vision, support, and encouragement, they decided to give the business a name and go all in. Together they co-founded Boca ChewLita and built it from the ground up.

By now you have to be wondering, but where do I go to get it, girl?!

The suspense to share this is also killing me, because we have an exclusive.



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

Currently, Boca ChewLita is a prepared meal delivery service. **HOWEVER**, beginning on February 1st, they have partnered up with The Antler Café located inside the Elks Lodge. They will be offering a fresh tavern-inspired menu and opening it up to

the public, not just for Elks Lodge members.

The partnership between Boca ChewLita and The Elks Lodge is something that they are all very excited about. The Elks volunteerism, supporting locals, and commitment to the community aligns



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

perfectly with what Lita and Sara envision for their business as well. They have been welcomed with open arms and together, they are creating a space where you can just feel all the good vibes.

In addition to the regular hours at The Antler Café, the girls are already planning the first event. They will be having an intimate pre-Valentine's Day dinner on Friday, February 13 with live music. You can purchase tickets at the Elks Lodge bar located at 1426 S. Commerce Street in Harlingen. Only 100 tickets will be sold in advance. Tickets cost \$40 and may be paid for with

cash or check. Seats will be reserved by time slot.

I'm super excited about this new chapter of Boca ChewLita, and I cannot wait for all the future events that they have planned at The Antler Café (such as Wildfire dinners!). If you haven't already, make sure you give these girls a follow to stay in the loop.

Signing off until next time, your friendly local foodie, Laisa :)

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Elks Lodge #1889

Valentine's Day Dinner
by Boca ChewLita

February 13, 2026

Starter

Antipasto Salad
Crisp spring mix & romaine, vine-ripened tomatoes, black olives, pepperoncini & artisan salami heart.
Served with toasted garlic bread.

Main Course

Tenderloin & Shrimp Alfredo
6 oz tenderloin (medium) & a shrimp skewer.
Pan-seared with shallots, mushrooms & garlic
parsley butter.
Served with herb fettuccine Alfredo.

Dessert

Chocolate Mousse Cake
Velvety chocolate mousse cake topped with fresh
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Drink

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Once Upon a Stage: Shrek the Musical at Harlingen Community Theatre



Courtesy of Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

**By Beth Marie Cantu
Ensign**

Fifty-one seasons in, the Harlingen Community Theatre (HCT) understands that longevity doesn't come from standing still. It comes from adapting, rebuilding, and continuing to invite new voices to the stage.

As a nonprofit community theatre, HCT produces four to five mainstage shows each

year, offering Broadway-style productions while keeping the doors open to performers of all ages and experience levels from across the Rio Grande Valley (RGV).

Performers range widely in age and experience, often sharing the stage across generations—first-time actors learning alongside seasoned “shining stars” in a uniquely collaborative setting. That shared

experience fosters confidence, mentorship, and lasting friendships.

That belief carries into Season 51, which reflects not only the theatre's history but its continued “come-as-you-are” energy. HCT's current production, *Shrek the Musical*, brings humor, heart, and spectacle to the stage. Based on the beloved DreamWorks film, the show celebrates individuality, friendship,

and finding where you belong—values that mirror the theatre itself.

Under the direction of Kathy “Miss Kathy” Eunice, the production emphasizes storytelling and ensemble unity, while Michael Ensign, serving as music director, shapes the sound of the show with precision and care. Hector Montalvo, the theatre's technical director, builds the show's world through imaginative lights, audio, and set design.

Together, the creative team balances high expectations with a supportive rehearsal environment—pushing performers to grow while reminding them why they love being there.

“Bringing to life a fairytale of this proportion takes more than just costumes and music and dancing. It takes trust in the artistic process, a lot of hard work, and a shared belief that the themes in the story will mean something to the people



Courtesy of Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

who come to watch," states Ensign.

Taking on such a well-known story comes with a unique kind of pressure. Jean-Luc Cañas, who portrays Shrek, must navigate not only the role but the emotional growth of a character often misunderstood at a first glance.

Longtime audiences may recognize Jean-Luc from HCT's 2019 production of *Shrek the Musical*, where he portrayed Lord Farquaad. His well-established presence with HCT has been a testament to the theatre's tradition of nurturing performers over time.

"Back when I played Lord Farquaad, who is an angry, intense character, I was younger

and had more energy," Jean-Luc laughs. "Over the past few years, I've mellowed out a bit, so I relate more to Shrek's pain and frustration. Even though he's become complacent with his life, he still has dreams. It is really interesting to experience the duality of the characters."

In only his second musical, Kaleb Ibáñez steps into the role of Donkey, a character that demands constant energy, comedic timing, and vocal stamina. Cast in one of the show's most demanding roles early on in his musical theatre journey, Kaleb brings a fresh momentum and enthusiasm to the stage. "Donkey is my favorite character from *Shrek*,"

states Kaleb. "He and I have a similar energy—but he is constantly moving and singing. It's going to be a challenge, because becoming a character like that requires a level of experience and physicality that I'm still working toward. I will practice, practice,

practice to ensure I can portray him at my best."

For the directors, moments like these—watching performers step into challenges before they feel fully ready—are the most rewarding part of the process.

"What a gratifying experience it is to witness the growth and progress



Courtesy of Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

of our performers, as they start off inexperienced and grow into demanding roles," says Miss Kathy. "To see the potential they have and watch them develop their skill base, to experience their new and emerging confidence, watch them take on new challenges and responsibilities is a privilege."

Productions like Shrek the Musical are made possible through ticket sales, donations, and volunteer support. Unlike larger institutions, HCT operates without an endowment, making each show run critical to

sustaining the life of the theatre.

Still, the atmosphere is one of optimism. Long after rehearsals end, cast members linger, sharing laughs and words of encouragement, already thinking about the next rehearsal, the next improvement, the next moment they step onstage.

Shrek the Musical stands as both a celebration of storytelling and a reminder of what community theatre does best: bringing people together, exactly as they are.

"Come sit in a seat, escape the chaos of the world outside the theatre doors. All are welcome," Miss Kathy says with a smile.

Shrek the Musical runs on two weekends: February 27 and 28 and March 1, 6, 7, and 8.

Friday & Saturday shows

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Jackson Street and Centennial Plaza

The Market at Wild August Nursery and Flower Farm
Every Saturday morning (February 7, 14, 21, and 28), 9:30 am to 1 pm
16802 Garrett Road

Valle Vista Mall Market Days
Every 2nd Saturday (February 14), 11 am to 7 pm

Harlingen Art Night
Last Friday (February 27), 7 pm to 10 pm
"A" Street and Jackson

February Special

Events

Live Pro Wrestling
February 1, doors at 4 pm
Harlingen Elks Lodge
Love is in the Air Sip and Paint
February 5, 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm
Sir's Martini Lounge



12 Corazones Market
February 7, 3 pm to 9 pm
Lon C. Hill Park



Harlingen Marathon
February 8
Lon C. Hill Park

Loads of Love Sip and Paint
February 11, 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm
Provecho y Salud

A Night of Love and Horror
Murder Mystery
February 13, 6 pm to 10 pm
Harlingen Bazaar

Galentine's Sip and Paint
February 13, 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm
The Pink Bubble

Valentine's Movie Night
February 14, 12 noon to 4 pm
Harlingen Public Library

Happy Valentine's Day Market
February 14, 2 pm to 8 pm
Lon C. Hill Park

Dance with Rewind
February 20, 7 pm to 10 pm
Tropic Winds RV Park

HAEF Team Zarate Swing for Scholarships Golf Tournament
February 21, 8 am
Tony Butler Golf Course

**Junior League of Harlingen
Casino Night Royale
February 21, 6 pm to 10 pm
Majestic Event Center**

**Sister Luv
February 22, 4 pm
Encore Lakewood RV Park**

**Harlingen Concert Association
Presents GQ (Gentlemen's Quartet)
February 24, 7:30 pm
Christian Fellowship Church**

**Shrek The Musical
February 27-28,
March 1-6, 7-8
Harlingen Community Theatre**

Beyond Harlingen

**Forget Me Not, XOXO
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**32nd Annual Fiesta de La Feria
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**Valentine's Night Under the Stars
with De Parranda
February 14, 6 pm
Mustang Lounge Club (Weslaco)**



**Valentine's Dance Night
February 14, 8 pm to 12 midnight
ABC Event Center (San Benito)**

**Los Fresnos Rodeo
February 19-22
AEP Texas Arena (Los Fresnos)**

**30th Annual SPI Market Days
February 20-22
Friday-Saturday, 9 am to 5 pm
Sunday, 10 am to 4 pm
South Padre Island Convention
Center**



**Jurassic Journey
February 21, 10 am to 2 pm
Valley Nature Center (Weslaco)
89th Annual Charro Days Fiesta
February 26-28
Brownsville**



Events subject to change.

**Check Explore Harlingen on
Facebook for the latest updates.**

Love Thy Neighbor Proves Faith is More Than Words



Courtesy of Jacob Garcia

**By Beth Marie Cantu
Ensign**

Over and over again, Jacob Garcia encountered the same realities facing seniors in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). Fixed incomes. Declining health. Homes in disrepair. Perhaps most painfully, isolation.

"I worked as a life insurance agent. We would go into senior homes, talk to them firsthand, and we'd see the social isolation problems, the living conditions, the lack of transportation. There were just a lot of needs that weren't being met on a daily basis," Garcia recalls.

Those firsthand experiences lent themselves to the creation of Love Thy

Neighbor, a registered 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization, which focuses on bettering the lives of a vulnerable generation: senior citizens. Guided by his Christian faith and years of service through organizations like Boy Scouts and earlier community initiatives, Jacob Garcia, the president and co-founder of Love Thy Neighbor, helped to shape the organization's mission of restoring dignity to those who need it most.

Love Thy Neighbor, once a simple product of passion now operates as a ministry with structured programs and outreach, proving what Garcia says: "Faith is more than words." And that philosophy shapes how the

organization operates on every level.

"We don't want to just be a resource center. We don't want to just be a phone number," Garcia says. "We want to be the help. We want to be the ones that get called. We want to be boots on the ground, hands in the dirt, putting the hand to the plow, and actually doing the work."

The mindset of faith expressed through action became the foundation for how Love Thy Neighbor translated belief into tangible service, notably through the organization's Restore, Renew, Rebuild program. Though currently paused, the program remains a key part of the group's long-term vision.

As Love Thy Neighbor prepares to relaunch Restore, Renew, Rebuild in phases, the initial focus will be cleanup and basic interior and exterior restoration efforts that improve safety and dignity while remaining financially sustainable.

Love Thy Neighbor's mission does not just serve senior citizens with a helping hand at home, but also companionship and financial support.

"Loneliness is a massive issue for seniors," Garcia says. "You can help with physical needs, but if there's no connection, something is missing. And we want [senior citizens] to know, 'You're still part of the

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Courtesy of Jacob Garcia

community. You matter. We see you.”

Beyond physical needs, Love Thy Neighbor prioritizes emotional and spiritual care through programs like Hearts & Hands Fellowship. Through crafts, prayer, and conversation, seniors are given space to be heard.

Programs like Adopt-A-Neighbor help to provide consistent, one-on-one connections that benefit both seniors and volunteers.

“We’re seeing that fellowship is just as important as physical assistance,” Garcia states.

As Love Thy Neighbor continues to grow, Garcia

emphasizes that community support makes the mission possible. One of the organization’s most pressing needs is a permanent meeting space—somewhere to bring volunteers together, strengthen partnerships, and turn faith into action more efficiently. Additionally, assistance through volunteering, donations, or partnerships can make all the difference in the life of a local senior citizen.

“Small acts of generosity go a long way,” Garcia says. “Tools, supplies, gas money. It all translates into meaningful change.”

Ultimately Garcia hopes Love Thy Neighbor helps rewrite the narrative on how

the RGV cares for its aging population.

“Our hope is that Love Thy Neighbor plays a role in shaping a stronger, more compassionate Rio Grande Valley,” he says. “One where our seniors are

honored, respected, and not forgotten.”

If you’re interested in getting involved, reach out to Love Thy Neighbor at info@Ltntexas.org. You can also find them on Instagram and Facebook. ♦

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Artist of the Month

By Abigail Muñiz-Garcia

It started on a small stage in Weslaco, Texas in 2012: a woman, her guitar, and a request to join the band on stage for a couple of songs. Armed with her vocals and guitar, Magda performed Rhiannon by Fleetwood Mac. That was how she met her now-husband and bandmate Ray.

Ray and Magda Peynado who went on to form their band, In

From Six Days to a Lifetime

Six Days, five years after initially meeting, play their music at places like The 83 Winery in Harlingen, Upper Deck Hotel & Bar in South Padre Island, and have even ventured to the Texas hill country to play tunes for crowds in Kerrville.

Magda still remembers the reaction of the crowd the first time she played with Ray and his band.

“The crowd just... screamed, they just loved it,” she said.



Courtesy of In Six Days



Courtesy of In Six Days

Between their initial meeting, to forming their band, Ray became Magda's guitar and vocal instructor, helping her hone her musical skills. They married in 2015. Magda supported Ray in his music endeavors and continued practicing her skills until they finally formed their band in 2017 when she asked Ray to join her.

“It wasn't that easy,” Magda recalled. “He said, ‘go out and get some gigs.’ And I did. I don't know how that happened, but

I landed 10 gigs, all in a row. I did (that) without them even knowing us.”

After playing those 10 gigs, Ray left the band he was in to devote his time to playing with his wife in their newly formed band.

The duo likes to play music from the 1970s and 1990s as well as country music, but they say they can do everything.

“It depends who we are playing for,” Magda said. “We just really love what we do.”

Magda's guitar playing has improved with her

husband's help and Magda has in turn helped him grow professionally as well. She has pushed him outside of his comfort zone vocally by encouraging him to try new songs.

"She helps a lot with giving me structure and encouraging me to learn songs that maybe I wouldn't have necessarily wanted to learn," he said. "I've played with so many different bands and I've never really sang the lead part... so that's the strength that I can add."

"And that's because I push him to do it," Magda added with a giggle.

The duo also recently purchased a 1975 Volkswagen bus. After the pandemic, they made a plan and started saving money to purchase a van, reminiscent of the time period and decade they love.

"It was all paid cash. It was all from tips from love. That's why we named her Heartlight," Magda said, the name

also a reference to a Neil Diamond song.

"Playing the music from the 1970s, it's an icon from that era," Ray said of their new/old red vehicle.

The music they play that helped pay for their 'Heartlight' gets a response that Ray always appreciates.

"I just enjoy seeing people smile and the reactions to the songs that we play... that they're enjoying themselves and having a good time," he said. "Being able to see their expressions."

Looking ahead, the band isn't opposed to expanding their fanbase outside of Texas and possibly writing and recording their own music one day.

And if you're wondering where their band name comes from, it all started as an inside joke early on into their musical journey.

"When we were first dating, people always came up to us and they always asked the same



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

question- 'Hey you guys are so cute, how long have you known each other?' Magda said. "And we'd look at them real seriously and say- six days."

Unrehearsed, both Magda and Ray utter 'six days' at the exact same moment as if in sync,

a testament of the bond they have that translates to whatever they do.

For more information on the band, to inquire about a private party, and to see where they will be playing next, please visit their website: insixdaysband.com where you can also find links to their social media. ♦



Courtesy of In Six Days

Pink Bubble

Christy Mendez
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Courtesy of Nathan Huerta

By Roel Rodriguez

For athletes, success is often tied to a lifelong dream. Many athletes develop ambitions to succeed at sports at a young age. Especially athletes aiming to compete at elite levels in the sport that they love.

That is exactly what has happened for one of our own. Nathan Huerta, a 2021 graduate of Harlingen High School, has continued his football career at the highest level possible in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV).

Nathan is the only player from Harlingen selected to be on the inaugural University of Texas Rio

Grande Valley (UTRGV) Vaqueros football team. The UTRGV Vaqueros played its first NCAA Division 1 football season in the Southland Conference last year. Nathan's accomplishment is remarkable, as just 1 to 2 percent of high school athletes compete at the NCAA D1 level. With Nathan as the sole Harlingen player among more than 90 UTRGV team members, I wanted to learn about his experience as a member of the 2025 Vaquero Football team.

The Journey

To appreciate what Nathan has achieved, one must appreciate his fascinating

and inspiring journey in football and in life.

Harlingen Cardinal Nation will remember Nathan as an exceptional athlete excelling in football and track. In football, Nathan was a truly outstanding force on the Cardinal defense. He was recognized with numerous awards and accolades, which included District Defensive MVP and 6A "All State" 2nd Team Defensive Lineman. Nathan also earned an opportunity to play in the Blue Grey All American Bowl in Dallas, Texas. This game featured the best high school football players in the country. Given the success Nathan had in high school football, he naturally wanted to continue playing at the

next level in college to fulfill his vision.

After graduating from Harlingen High, Nathan accepted an opportunity to play at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. During his time at Southwestern University, Nathan recorded 15 tackles, 2.5 sacks, 1 forced fumble, and 1 blocked field goal in 10 games. Clearly, Nathan had a successful year with the Pirates football team, but he desired more. He decided that remaining at Southwestern University would not adequately support his aspirations in collegiate football, specifically competing against the caliber of players to achieve his dream of playing at the highest level.

Therefore, Nathan decided to enter the NCAA transfer portal and seek an opportunity to play at another school. Nathan's network helped secure an opportunity to tryout as a "walk on" at Texas State University (TXST). Out of 75 participants at the tryout, Nathan was the only player to make the TXST Bobcat football team.

In Nathan's first year as a TXST football player, he was designated as a "Red Shirt" player and was a member of the TXST "Scout" team. That meant no playing time but he had an opportunity to improve his strength,

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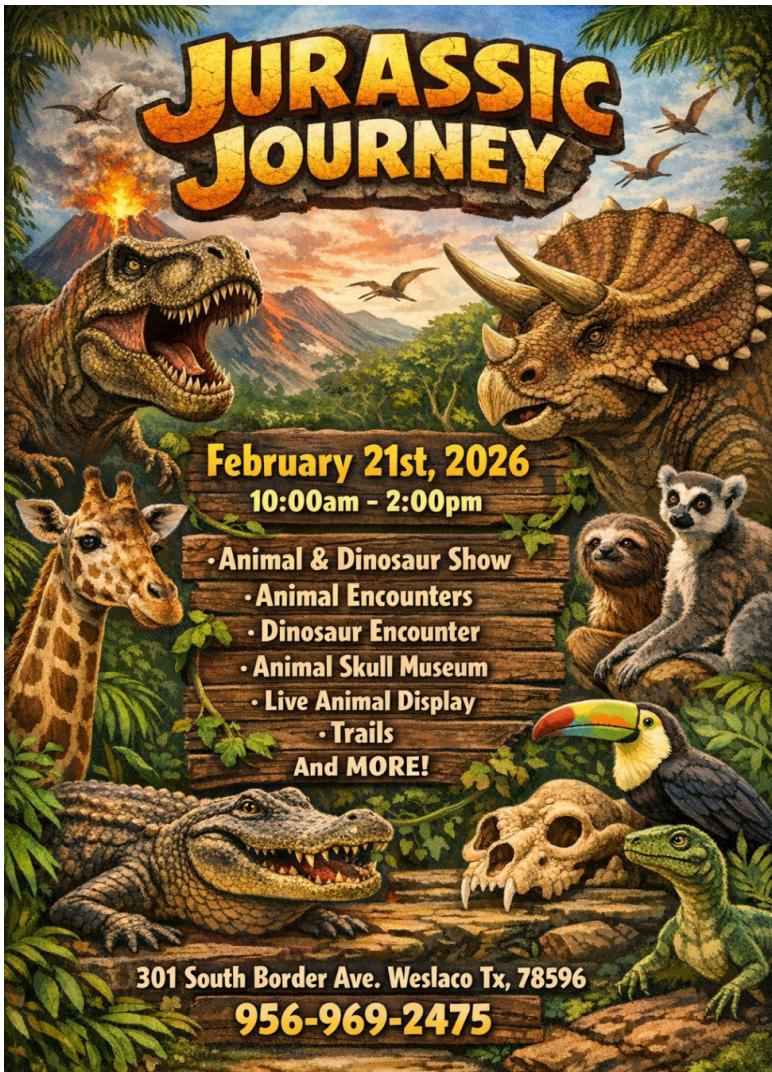
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conditioning, and speed, as well as practice against elite D1 football talent.

In his second year at TXST, Nathan did get playing time during games but primarily only played special teams (punts and kick offs) and during lopsided games. He recorded 3 tackles in 8 games and was part of the First Responders Bowl Championship team.

After completing his “Red Shirt” Sophomore year with the TXST football team, Nathan decided to enter the transfer portal once again. Within minutes of declaring his eligibility to play for another program, Nathan received 30+ notifications and continued to receive numerous calls throughout this process from various D1 and D2 schools and coaches.

Although the decision to transfer came with uncertainty, Nathan recognized how blessed he was with the amount of interest he had received from so many college football programs. Nathan was intrigued with possibly playing for the brand new football program at UTRGV and with playing closer to his family, but his priority was to find the right location to help him achieve his lifelong dream.



Courtesy of Nathan Huerta

Nathan conducted an official visit with the UTRGV staff and immediately discovered that this was the best place for him to continue his college football career. Nathan credits Head Coach Bush, the coaching staff, the UTRGV facilities, the roster, playing closer to home, and the opportunity for significant playing time as the deciding factors for choosing UTRGV.

Nathan did get significant playing time and earned a starting position on the Vaqueros defensive line. At 6 feet tall and 270 pounds, Nathan routinely competed against bigger players, but he had his best statistical collegiate season in tackles and sacks in his college career, to date, and was a key member of the highly successful Vaquero football defense, which was ranked as the third best defense in the Southland Conference. Nathan played 12 games (started 11) for the Vaqueros, which finished with a historic 9 win and 3 losses record, making UTRGV the winningest first-year Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) since 1978.

The inaugural UTRGV football season was full of highlights for Nathan, but his most memorable personal highlight is a 13-yard sack and forced fumble that he caused against the University of Incarnate Word, which lead to a UTRGV defensive touchdown. Nathan smiles and beams with pride as he described how happy he was

for his defensive teammate to score a touchdown from that play.

For all UTRGV football fans, we are familiar with the unprecedented performance and success of the football team. This was a team that was expected to finish last in their conference in all preseason polls. The UTRGV football team exceeded all expectations. They were undefeated at home. Their 3 losses were to ranked teams, and the unmatched fan support really set a standard for this program.

The Right Choice

We know the team's outcome, but I was still interested as to why Nathan picked UTRGV over other schools. He said that he was drawn to the program's environment and felt very comfortable when he initially visited with the coaching staff. He also believed that he would have a real opportunity for significant playing time at a D1 school near his hometown. He was attracted to playing for a team competing in their inaugural season and to achieve something special even though he really didn't know what to expect initially.

Nathan often spoke about his goal of playing at the next level and, after spending time in prayer and meditation, decided that the UTRGV program was the ideal place for him to pursue his football aspirations.

When asked to share the best part of his experience



Courtesy of Nathan Huerta

on the 2025 UTRGV football team, Nathan credits his coaching staff and his teammates. The entire coaching staff and, specifically Head Coach Bush, have created a “team oriented, team first, and play for each other” culture that has resonated throughout the entire program. Nathan describes Coach Bush as a “players’ coach” because he connects with each player and shows that he truly cares about each one of them. Coach Bush focuses on building relationships with everyone on the team and takes a vested interest in them. Nathan also credited Defensive Line Coach Lane Lankford as another catalyst for building the team culture. Nathan boasts that Coach Regalado is a “recruiting genius” and works tirelessly at finding the players with the right fit to enhance the team chemistry. Lastly,



Courtesy of Nathan Huerta

Nathan credits Coach Gamble with tremendous game planning and Nathan shared how impressed he was with Coach Gamble's dedicated work specifically in the countless hours he would spend on preparing the UTRGV players for an opponent.

Nathan refers to his teammates as "having a strong bond" and "brotherhood." He stated that the players consistently support, motivate, encourage, and assist each other during team workouts. The team regularly spends time together outside of practice, including group meals, and demonstrates genuine care for one another, a dynamic Nathan described as distinct from his experiences at other schools.

He also mentioned that the team's reaction to the season's outcome was not surprising. From the very first day, Coach Bush emphasized a philosophy of "go out, win, and dominate," and the players fully embraced this mindset,

which translated into remarkable success on the field.

Nathan proudly used the term "Trench Dogs" to describe the coaches and players dedicated to the defensive line. Nathan says they are very close, share a strong bond, and spend a lot of time together.

Nathan's decision to play for UTRGV was the right one, and he contributed to a remarkable, memorable, and historic experience.

The Grind

I was curious about the amount of training Nathan, and his teammates require to compete at the Division 1 level. Nathan grinned and explained, "We train every day, often multiple times throughout the day."

At UTRGV, players begin their day with workouts at the Vaquero Performance Center (VPC) every morning at 6 am, focusing on both strength and core training. Afterward, the team usually moves to the practice fields next to the VPC for group conditioning, such as running. In the afternoons, athletes return to either the VPC or the practice fields for additional work, specialty training, and further conditioning exercises. It's a demanding schedule of training and practice.

I asked him what it's like to play Division I college football game. Nathan acknowledged the competitive nature of the field but has recognized his ability to perform at that level and compete with any

opponent. His growth as an athlete, combined with his strong faith and spirituality, has provided him with the assurance and conviction that he is qualified to participate at this level.

Nathan explained that he regularly competes against offensive linemen who are significantly taller and typically outsize him by over 30 pounds. While he may not possess the same physical stature or strength as his competitors, he leverages his natural quickness and low center of gravity and skill to his advantage. Nathan consistently distinguishes himself by outperforming opponents through his football IQ and a strong understanding of the game. His statistical performance demonstrates his effectiveness in reaching the ball, making tackles, pressuring quarterbacks, and disrupting the offensive momentum of opposing teams.

Another unique part of college football for Nathan and his teammates is the world of receiving revenue through the "Name, Image and Likeness" program or

"NIL" as known throughout NCAA athletics. The NIL program lets college athletes earn money from endorsements while maintaining their amateur status. Nathan participates in NIL and has a couple of local endorsements in the Harlingen area.

All NIL opportunities and endorsements must be processed through UTRGV Athletics for compliance and transparency. Every semester, UTRGV Athletics gives "Do's and Don'ts" training to all student athletes to ensure compliance of the rules and regulations.

Nathan values the NIL program for helping him improve his communication



Courtesy of Nathan Huerta

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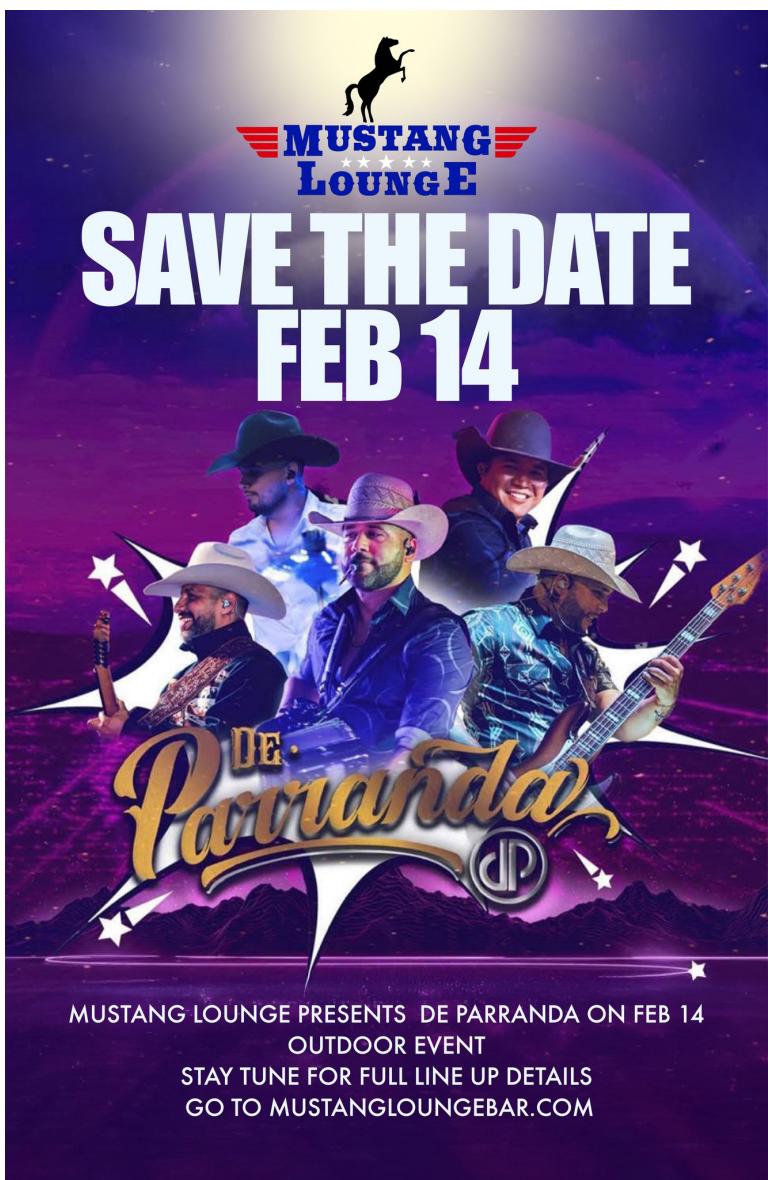


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and interpersonal skills through interactions with business owners and individuals. He added that he greatly enjoys filming endorsement videos for local businesses and appreciates the chance to promote them on social media as a pseudo “influencer.”

Nathan mentioned that he previously worked part-time, attended classes, trained, traveled, and played while at Southwestern University and TXST. He mentioned that balancing a part-time job with attending classes, studying, and fulfilling all the requirements of training, preparation, travel, and games at the D1 level is extremely challenging. Players now face year-round demands that require significant time and commitment. The NIL program lets athletes earn income and participate in extracurricular activities typical of D1 football players.

With Nathan having another year of college football eligibility, returning to play with the UTRGV Vaqueros, and being the only Harlingen player on the team, I highly encourage businesses and business owners in Harlingen to contact Nathan at 956-626-5756 to discuss the opportunity to endorse your business. It would be great if we could become part of the village that supports Nathan as he continues to pursue his lifelong dreams.

The Reason

I asked Nathan for the keys to his success. He

promptly attributes his success to his faith in Jesus Christ. His commitment to Christianity is a significant aspect of his identity, with faith and spirituality playing an integral role in his life. He credits his father, Ramon, and his mother, Stephanie, for introducing and exposing him to his religion. He puts faith first, recognizing the many blessings he has received throughout his life, including his family and his talents. He is grateful for the many opportunities that have come his way. Although he received interest from several other places in Texas to further his football career, he remembers an old vision of himself, doing exactly what he does today and feeling blessed with success. Nathan is currently preparing for his fifth and final year of college football, and I am confident that he will continue to be guided and inspired to achieve his dreams.

Nathan also credits his very supportive family and the bond that they share. In addition to his mother and father, Nathan's brother, Noah and his sister, Sophia, provide him with constant love, support and prayers.

The Next Chapter

Nathan Huerta will graduate with his bachelor's degree in May 2026. He plans to attend graduate school at UTRGV to pursue a master's in health or sociology and aims for a career focused on the business/administrative side of healthcare.



Courtesy of Nathan Huerta

However, and not surprising, he remains open to pursuing opportunities in the National Football League, Canadian Football League, or United Football League after completing his college football career at UTRGV.

He mentioned before that he dreamed long ago of playing football at an elite level, though he never specified that his ambition was limited to Division 1 football. I truly believe Nathan Huerta is capable of achieving any goal he sets

his mind to, as I believe that with God, all things are possible.

Thank you, Nathan, for representing Harlingen and for representing our community. Thank you for sharing your UTRGV Football experience with us. We wish you nothing but the best during your final collegiate football season at UTRGV this year and we look forward to supporting you and celebrating your success. God Speed, Nathan!♦



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Recipes



Courtesy of Mamie Moon
By Mamie Moon

It's February and love is in the air! I know my man loves it when I surprise him with one of these large Keto cookie cakes. They are packed with flavor but don't have all the sugars and unhealthy ingredients typically used by local supermarkets.

Ingredients:

- 2 cups, almond flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Keto white chocolate chips (Lilly's brand)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup Keto dark chocolate chips (Lilly's brand)

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. In a large mixing bowl, add the dry ingredients: almond flour, cinnamon, baking powder, salt, and lastly, the white and dark keto chocolate chips. Mix all together.
3. In a small mixing bowl, you will combine the wet ingredients: Keto maple syrup, vanilla extract, and the coconut oil.

4. After everything has been mixed, you can add the wet ingredients to the dry ones.
5. Once all combined, I typically let the bowl sit in the fridge for about 10 minutes as it's easier to work with this recipe chilled rather than warm.
6. After it's chilled, form the dough the best you can into a large heart shape and put it on a cookie sheet.
7. Bake at 350 degrees for 15 minutes.
8. After baking, let the cookie set and cool before cutting and serving.

This little romantic dessert is sure to please that



special someone in your life. Hope you have a sweet Valentine's Day!

Mamie Moon, owner of Mamie Bakes, turned Keto baker when she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease in 2005. She ditched sugar, gluten, and lactose and became the boss of her own health. She is a home-based Keto baker whose treats can be purchased and picked up locally in Harlingen. ♦



Courtesy of Mamie Moon

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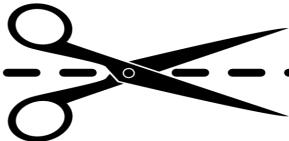
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